

The Walk

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I remember the first time I met Tim. I had heard he was "intense" from the other palliative care nurses and that it was a challenging visit. I had heard he was a professional mountaineer, an adventurer, that he had climbed high and that he had climbed with the best. I had heard he was "in denial" about dying and I remember flinching and thinking that denial has its purpose. I was mindful of how difficult it must be for him at this stage. He was young and dying and he knew it. He had a brain tumour. It came my turn to visit him at home and I approached the visit with an open mind. The front door was a heavy creaky door and it had been left ajar. I called out hello and heard a voice call me in.

I walked towards the space where I thought Tim was and found him sitting in a recliner chair, although he wasn't really sitting in the chair, he possessed the chair. He was the king on the throne. He was holding oranges in both hands. He looked warily at me and I tried to hide my shock. He was beautiful. Simply beautiful. The other nurses had not mentioned how stunningly handsome he was. He was tanned and muscular and his eyes were gorgeous. He was someone you would see at the airport and stop and watch him walk past. Better than George Clooney. He took my breath away.

I regained my composure and found myself a seat. Tim was wary of me as I tried to gain rapport and he played politely with the conversation. He seemed very smart about this encounter and I wondered what his expectations were from the palliative care team. He was tossing the oranges between his hands as a physiotherapy exercise. It took him all of his concentration at times and he told me that he would

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never ever give up. I watched him toss the oranges rhythmically, I was in a spell. He talked of the treatment, the surgery, the experimental options, the way that the four leading specialists had told him they had no further hope for him. He was looking into radical unproven treatment. He kept rolling the oranges and talking.

I silenced my own thoughts and judgements in terms of what I understood Tim's prognosis to be and I think that Tim sensed this. There was so much to say but I knew he didn't need my opinions. I chose to listen and I tried hard to just be. Then Tim dropped one of the oranges. It was horrifying. We both gasped in unison about what it meant, about what had not been said. He could not hold the orange.

Tim leaned forward out of the chair to pick the orange up, he was so determined. It was difficult for his coordination and he looked as if he would fall from the chair. The orange rolled away from him, circled and teased. I knew he did not have feeling in part of his hand and I knew I couldn't help him. It was his to prove. The orange eluded him and went under the chair. He toyed with it as it circled the floor and hid away. He kept struggling with trying to get a grip around the fruit to pick it up. It was an eternity before he claimed it finally. He sat back up in the chair and we grinned at each other again. Silent relief and triumph.

Our conversation then shifted. He asked me hard questions about what I thought about alternative therapies, about meditation, and about positive thinking. We were both honest, and the conversation became raw and deep. He told me about his own self awareness journey, his quest for meaning. There was nowhere to hide. Words hung in the air, silences were swollen with meaning, bursting into deeper truths. There was a natural conclusion to our conversation and I felt that the visit was full

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and complete. I had given all that I had. I had given more than I knew I had. I felt something special had happened and I was moved by where the conversation had taken us. I was thinking about wrapping up the visit when Tim said "Would you take me for a walk?"

I gulped inwardly, I felt completely depleted and exhausted and I had had enough. "Sure" I said. So much for our sudden congruency. I was lying. I did not have time. I did not want to. Then Tim said in a rare conceding sentence – "I need someone to help me".

It took Tim some time to get out of the chair and he fell back a few times, losing his balance. I used my trick of touching the back of his neck lightly to propel him forward. He finally stood up like a tall tree coming out of the ground, the man was a giant. He told me how to hold him, I put my arm around his waist, and he put his arm around my shoulders. He towered over me and we were sudden dance partners. It was when he was dragging his foot I knew we couldn't make it. Yet we walked down the stairs and out into the brightest of all sunshine.

Tim wanted to walk up to the end of his street and it was a ritual that he failed every day. He couldn't do this walk. He stumbled and leaned heavily into me. We were one. It was an occupational health and safety crime in motion. We were committed. It felt as if we would both fall. I even pictured it, I felt the injury. I wondered how I would explain it to other people, his wife, my boss. There was no way we could make it to the end of the cul de sac, it was Everest and treacherous in length. I swallowed risk in every step. Adrenaline kept us upright. This was a doomed expedition. In being with him, I kept going. We continued our impossible trek.

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After going too far, I could see the end of the street. Tim pointed to a low brick wall at the last house. I could not see us making it. But we did. We sat there like soul searching humpty dumpty's, side by side, together on the wall. Tim told me stories of mountain climbing, his favourite places, what he had overcome. Tim talked about dying and leaving his family, his wife and kids. He was genuinely bewildered by this fate, yet finally realistic. His tears flowed, and I sat by this heaving, sad, beautiful man. We sat for a long time. Andy asked me about dying. I told him what I knew. I had forgotten my worry about how we would make it back to the house. I told him what I knew about dying.

Somehow the walk back to the house seemed easier. Tim gestured towards an old canvas chair in the yard near the fence. It was an old flimsy canvas chair that looked like it would break in half. We had gone so far, I didn't want him to fall over now. He collapsed in to the chair and somehow it held him. He did not command this chair like the other one. This chair was forgiving and showed him mercy. This time everything was more fragile. He was now talking about his funeral. He wanted a simple ceremony. He wanted people to plant native trees. He wanted so much. I said that I would help him. I talked to him about comfort measures, staying at home, having family around, about being himself.

Later that afternoon I met the Team for handover and I found that I couldn't say much, I couldn't capture the visit, how his essence and vulnerability was offered in that time. How I was different for having met him. My comments were compulsory but wry. I said that his Dexamethasone was the same dose and that he was managing short distances.

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When the time for dying came months later, Tim and I meditated together. He was bed bound, catheterised, and on an infusion pump. He could not move, but he could squeeze our hands. I understood him although he could no longer talk, and I wiped the tears that trailed his cheek. I talked to his eyes and I was as tender as snow falling. We meditated on his favourite place, and we did everything he had said he would want. I knew what to do because we had already done the walk.